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## **The Poor of the Mass Media**

*Negative Images in the US and UK versus Positive in Sweden and Denmark*

Larsen, Christian Albrekt

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Stories and pictures in the mass media form an important basis for creating opinions of 'the poor' and welfare recipients. The media content influences who we think these people are, how we think they behave and what we think should be done to either help or punish them. In *The Rise and Fall of Social Cohesion*, Christian Albrekt Larsen illustrates how the US and UK are caught in a vicious circle. High levels of poverty and a targeted welfare system produce a large volume of newsworthy negative stories, which make further punishment the most likely political response. Who would want to help scroungers and spongers? In contrast, Sweden and Denmark are caught in a virtuous circle. Low levels of poverty and a universal welfare system reduce the amount of newsworthy negative stories and allow room for stories about the deserving poor. Who does not want to help our ordinary fellow citizens in need? Here, he describes his research.

# The poor of the mass media



### The study of newspapers

In order to substantiate this argument, I studied a sample of 1,750 British, 1,750 Danish and 1,750 Swedish newspapers. My team and I covered five major newspapers published between 2004 and 2009. From a number of American studies, we already know that the American mass media, in general, presents poor people and welfare recipients in a highly stereotypical way: the black man of the ghetto and the 'welfare queen' are well established. However, it is hard to tell how much of this is caused by negative racial stereotypes and how much by the (perceived) anti-social behaviour of poor people. In my book, I argue that it is not just a matter of race. The UK is an interesting case, as the poor are (still) described as primarily a white phenomenon. But still, the stereotypes are very similar to those found in the US. From looking at newspapers in Sweden and Denmark, both with moderate levels of poverty and inequality, we can learn how those at 'the bottom of society' are described. It turns out there is a world of difference.

### The positive stories

It is cumbersome and tricky to categorise mass media content. I developed a simple distinction between 'negative', 'positive' and 'other' stories about poor people and welfare recipients. As expected, the British newspapers had fewer

positive stories than the Swedish and Danish ones. Stories about child poverty, pensioner poverty and the absence of jobs are example of 'positive' stories. Stories about homelessness are typically also framed as 'positive'. The overall finding was that 41 per cent of British stories depict poor people in a positive light, compared with 62 per cent in Sweden and 55 per cent in Denmark. What kept the British stories somewhat positive were features about old-age poverty and anti-poverty policies that ease the living conditions of those at the bottom of society.

## The negative stories

The most negative poverty topic is the abuse of benefits and services. A frequent story in the British media deals directly with fraud, typically based on a preliminary charge or court conviction of someone who has cheated the benefits system. I found many such stories in the UK (10 per cent). In Sweden, I found only one in the sample and, in Denmark, I did not find a single story. Another frequent British story is of the single mother abusing the welfare system. This abuse is typically not illegal, but the stories clearly indicate that these mothers have made a living out of producing children to be supported by the welfare state. Thus, a white version of the black American 'welfare queen' is found in the UK.

Together, stories about the abuse of benefits made up 19 per cent of the British stories about poor people, compared with only 2 per cent of the Danish stories and 1 per cent of the Swedish stories. In total, 43 per cent of the British stories were 'negative', compared with 27 per cent in Sweden and 26 per cent in Denmark. What kept the Swedish and Danish mass media somewhat negative were stories and pictures of immigrants living in deprived areas.

A more qualitative reading of the material revealed the presence of stereotypes in the UK, which are well known from the US context. Some of the most salient were 'scrounger man' and the 'welfare queen'. The reading also revealed the absence of these stereotypes in Sweden and Denmark.

## 'Scrounger man'

Modern societies have always had a group of people with so little attachment to the labour market that they cannot be fitted into a class schema. However, regardless of the historical parallels, the process of de-industrialisation has increased the size of this group of people, and a rich vocabulary has developed to label them:

'shirker', 'sponger', 'scrounger' and 'chav' all refer to men at the bottom who do not work. Such men are entitled to more benefits in the UK than in the US, which causes a greater connotation of their being defrauders of welfare benefits and services. Their demonisation has been excellently described by Jones, who provides examples from a broad range of television shows, newspaper articles, commercials and political statements.<sup>1</sup>

The sampled newspapers provide many examples of this stereotype. One of the more spectacular is of Malcolm Bingley, a 60-year-old white man who, according to the *Daily Mirror*, had not worked for 17 years. While being on jobseeker's allowance he was caught spending £20,000 on a trip with the last Concorde to the US. The *Daily Mirror* presented this story under the headline 'Connedcorde. Jobless benefit cheat splashed out £20,000 on supersonic trip to US', followed by a picture of Malcolm and a Concorde.

Another – less spectacular – example is that of Keith Macdonald. The *Daily Express* (3 July 2006) printed his story under the headline '£1m benefits bill for 21-year-old who has fathered seven children by seven mothers in seven years', followed by four pictures: one of Keith (in a woolly hat and looking directly into the camera) and three photos with different mothers. The *Daily Star* also printed the story on the same day under the headline 'The Slobfather', using the same four pictures, plus an additional picture of Keith together with his current girlfriend. The latter is without any symbols (and could be 'misinterpreted' as of a happy young couple), but directly beneath it follows the text 'Jobless Keith MacDonald is to become a dad for the seventh time in seven years – all with different women'.

The British stereotype of the man at the bottom is, as in the US, defined by its deviation from the ideal nuclear middle-class family. In contrast to middle-class men, these men do not work. They have too many children, and they have too many women. Thus, the American idea of some uncontrollable sexuality of men of the under-class is clearly evoked in British stereotypes, even though race is not used to distinguish between them and the middle class.

Untrustworthy scroungers, spongers and shirkers are largely absent in the Swedish and Danish media content from 2004 to 2009. On the one hand, this might be expected because of low poverty rates and more universal benefits

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and services. On the other hand, however, one can also find plenty of unemployed men, men defrauding welfare, men fathering many children, and men irresponsibly contributing to family instability in Scandinavia. Thus, the absence of these stories reveals, above all, that the stereotype of the untrustworthy men of the bottom has not developed in Sweden and Denmark.

Only two stories about welfare fraud were found in the sampled Danish newspapers, and only one in the sampled Swedish newspapers. In the Danish case, both stories concerned a middle-aged immigrant, Isam El-Skat, who participated in a TV programme in which the Ministry of Labour tries to find jobs for long-term unemployed participants. The Minister managed to find a cleaning job for Isam, who had been on social assistance benefits for 18 years. But Isam did not show up for the planned job interview. The tabloid *BT* (15 January 2005) printed a critical letter to the editor under the headline 'He won't work – only demand', followed by a picture of Isam with the Minister of Labour. Three days later, a follow-up story, using the same picture, related that the municipalities had got involved in the case. This was the only abuse story we could find, but it is symptomatic that it was an immigrant man who the newspaper charged with benefit fraud.

The sampled Swedish newspapers contained only one article on benefit fraud, an editorial in *Svenska Dagbladet* (7 March 2005), under the telling headline 'Naturally, not everyone cheats', next to a picture of a man fishing on the ice. The picture is followed by the text 'Work morale is not synonymous with wage work'. After repeated statements about the impossibility of making generalisations about welfare claimants, the editor hints at the possibility of welfare fraud among immigrants, and refers to a study that shows that immigrants placed in rural areas are more prone to be on welfare, which might be the effect of a rural culture of welfare dependence. Thus, the fraud issue is narrowly focused on immigrants.

### 'Welfare queen'

The 'welfare queen' is another widespread and persistent American stereotype. The ideal type is the black lone mother who produces children in order to live off the (former) AFDC programme. The stereotype of the 'welfare queen' is intimately linked to de-industrialisation and the neo-liberal policy strategies. Therefore, it is understandable that white welfare queens can be found in the UK. Again, the British tabloid

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press is the most outspoken, but the sampled broadsheets also clearly indicate the presence of this stereotype, which seems as harsh as the American.

In the sample period, the white single mothers of the Williams family came to symbolise this stereotype. Jemma Williams became pregnant at 12, her sister Jade became pregnant at 14 and another sister, Natasha, became pregnant at 16. The *Daily Star* reported this story (23 May 2005) under the headline 'Give us more: sisters are mums at 12, 14, and 16 but moan £20,000 benefits are not enough', accompanied by three pictures: a picture of the sisters sitting with their small children (without much symbolism), a picture of their mother (also a single mother) and finally a picture of a white mother standing with six small children in six pushchairs. The latter picture is taken from the popular comedy television series, *Little Britain*, which makes fun of the teenage mum Vicky Pollard (played by Matt Lucas) and her six children. The same story appeared the same day in the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Express* with the respective headlines 'These three sisters all had babies in their teens. Each year they get benefits of £31,000. So who does their mum blame?...Their school' and 'Don't blame me for my three girls getting pregnant at 12, 14 and 16'. The picture of the sisters was used again in the *Sunday Mirror* six days later (29 May 2005) under the headline 'Teen mums stuck in rut'.

Gillian Nicholson is another example of the British 'welfare queen' stereotype. Her story was reported by the *Daily Express* under the headline 'Me work? That's a laugh, says queen of spongers' followed by picture of the 41-year-old white pregnant woman sitting in her underwear. She has 12 children with five different fathers. The text starts in the following way: 'Work-shy Gillian Nicholson is the mother of all spongers – the mum-of-12 has raked in £325,000 in tax-payers' handouts'. The analogue to the American 'welfare queen' stereotype is obvious and, therefore, it is no wonder that a columnist on the *Daily Express* (4 September 2006) states in a headline that 'Britain desperately needs a US-style benefits revolution' – a reference to the US retrenchment of the AFDC programme in 1996.

Sweden and Denmark do not have as many teenage pregnancies as the US or UK, which reduces the amount of moral panic and social problems. But they do have the same amount of single-parent children. Swedish and Danish lone parents work in more attractive jobs (plentiful in

the public sector), enjoy better childcare facilities and fewer disincentive problems (due to the more universal nature of welfare benefits and services). However, as in the US and UK, lone mothers in Sweden and Denmark are also a group of net receivers. Nevertheless, the sample of Swedish and Danish media content demonstrates that the 'welfare queen' stereotype has not developed in either of the two countries.

In the sampled Danish and Swedish newspapers there is only one article about a single mother abusing the system. The story in the Danish *Berlingske Tidende* (2 December 2007) is about a white woman aged 48, who for a period of 12–15 years told the municipality that she was living alone with her two daughters, which was not the case. She thereby claimed free services (totally free childcare and free household help) and benefits (extra child allowances) to which she was not entitled. The article featured two anonymous pictures of the woman: one taken on a bridge where she was enjoying the view (symbolising thoughtfulness) and one in her bedroom (symbolising the fact that the municipality had to go into the bedroom to discover the abuse of the system). The symbolic importance of the latter picture is directly stated in the article: that there is no easy way to solve this problem. The story is also framed very differently than the British articles, with the headline 'Caught in her own deception', underscoring the main point of the article that telling lies was bad for her and her family. The point is supported by the fact that the woman now has a job, is proud of her (now) grown-up children who know how to cheat the Danish welfare system, but refrain from doing so, and is proud of a couple of her friends who have a much better life without abusing the welfare system. Finally, the end of the article describes how the woman helps other disadvantaged people by providing them with shelter in her home. In contrast to the US and UK articles, this single Danish abuse article makes no reference to uncontrollable sexuality and does not insinuate that the children were created in order to receive welfare benefits.

The Swedish sample of newspapers had no articles referring to single mothers abusing the system.

### **The origin and importance of stereotypes**

That harsh media content is present in the UK and absent in Sweden and Denmark indicates, in my opinion, that differences in levels of poverty and universalism within the welfare system influence the amount of negative newswor-

thy stories about 'the poor'. The finding also indicates that the harsh US media content about poor African Americans is not only a matter of race. As in the UK, it is also a matter of poverty and the absence of universal welfare schemes. This is my interpretation and I acknowledge that it is not easy to pinpoint the exact origin of stereotypes. They are produced and reproduced in a complex interaction between mass culture, mass media and politics. There is, however, little doubt among public opinion researchers that these stereotypes, when established, are highly significant in influencing mass opinion and therefore also for politicians trying to get elected or re-elected. And the implications go even further. In my recent book, I demonstrate how these stereotypes also influence overall trust levels in society, which social science has pinpointed as crucial for the functioning of democracy, economic growth and general wellbeing. Therefore, the UK and the US seem to be caught in a vicious circle that is difficult to break. Sweden and Denmark are caught in a virtuous circle from which they constantly benefit. One of the crucial questions is whether increased ethnic diversity will break the Nordic circle. In my opinion, the ethnic diversity is indeed a challenge for the Nordic countries, at least in the short run. ■

**Christian Albrekt Larsen** is a Professor at the Centre for Comparative Welfare Studies, Aalborg University, Denmark

*The Rise and Fall of Social Cohesion: the construction and de-construction of social trust in the US, UK, Sweden and Denmark* is published by Oxford University Press, 2010

1. O. Jones, *Chaos: the demonization of the working class*, Verso, 2011

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